

AYLA
REYNOLDS

Posted December 17,
2016

Updated December 19,
2016

Not a cold case: After 5 years, Ayla Reynold's family, police still hope for leads

More than 1,500 tips have been sent to police since the toddler disappeared, but no charges have been filed.

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Ayla Reynolds

Trista Reynolds implores anyone with information about the disappearance of her daughter, Ayla, to come forward.

It is a plea that may sound like a broken record five years later, but she prays it will produce results.

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“I need someone to come forward,” she said. “I need that one witness who can maybe make a difference, and especially this year.”

Reynolds, 28, was referring to the fact that she and her family have decided after five years to request [the court declare Ayla dead](#) so that they can preserve the rights of the child’s estate and file lawsuits in the future.

Ayla was 20 months old when [she was reported missing on Dec. 17, 2011, from her grandmother's home at 29 Violette Ave.](#) in Waterville. She was in the care of her father, Justin DiPietro. His then-girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, and his sister, Elisha DiPietro, also were in the house.

Police say they think the adults in the house know more than they have said, that [foul play was involved](#) in Ayla's disappearance and that she is dead. Trista Reynolds agrees and is angry no one has come forward to say what happened to Ayla.

No charges have been filed in the case. Many searches for Ayla have come up empty.

Justin and Elisha DiPietro and Roberts have not responded to requests for comment, but Ayla's maternal family members continue to speak out as they have in recent television interviews. They say they will never stop pursuing justice in the case.

Seeking a declaration of death may help to bring some kind of closure for the family as to Ayla's fate, but it also is a difficult conclusion to face, according to Trista Reynolds.

More than anyone, she has agonized over her loss, hoping on the one hand that Ayla is out there somewhere, but on the other, harboring a dread and practical realization that the young girl is dead.

Trista says her two young boys, Raymond, 5, and Anthony, 3, keep her going, day to day. It is they who will carry her through the probate process seeking a declaration of Ayla's death.

"This is a whole new trauma, particularly of explaining it to my 5-year-old, who watched the television interview with me," Trista Reynolds said last week. "I couldn't keep it from him. He broke down crying. It hurt me because I had to tell him what happened to Ayla."

Trista said she planned to spend Saturday — the five-year anniversary of when Ayla was reported missing — doing what she has done every year.

"I set off a balloon and light a candle for her at 4:30 p.m."

STILL INVESTIGATING

Maine State Police Lt. Jeff Love, [who has worked the case since its inception](#), said police will continue to investigate until they find answers. The case, which authorities say is the largest criminal investigation in Maine history, is open and active, and police work on it regularly and have never lost momentum, according to Love.

"It's not considered a cold case because of efforts put forth," he said. "It's a missing person case, and we said that from early on; but there's foul play involved and suspected."

Asked what police need to help further the case, Love said, "We need all of the individuals in the house when Ayla disappeared to be forthcoming. We have made progress, and that work will continue."

He said that while he could not get into specifics, police have learned a piece of information that has helped the case.

Police always have wanted the public's assistance in determining what happened to Ayla, and of the more than 1,500 leads received, the majority have been helpful, according to Love. Police continue to welcome information and believe there could be "that one lead that could be the lead that puts us in a much better position than we're in."

"It's the eyes and the ears that are out there forwarding information to us that has helped this move forward," Love said.

State police are working with the state attorney general's office on the case, which is active and ongoing, according to Deputy Attorney General Lisa Marchese. The role of the office, she said, is to provide any assistance state police need.

"If there's probable cause to charge someone, then we'd be the office that actually files the charges," Marchese said Thursday. "It is our office that would file charges if there became probable cause to believe that someone committed a crime and caused the death of Ayla Reynolds."

Marchese said she thinks it is important that people know the case continues to be worked.

"It's certainly on all of our minds, and we certainly recognize it's a difficult time for Ayla's family, on the fifth anniversary."

[Jeff Hanson, Trista Reynold's stepfather](#), who posts updates on [aylareynolds.com](#), a website designed to spread awareness about the case, said that an attorney who worked pro bono for the family to explore whether it would be viable to file a wrongful death suit in the case has decided not to file it.

That attorney, Thomas Bigos, determined that in order to launch a successful civil case, reliable witnesses who could speak about the final days of Ayla's life would have to be in place or independent forensic evidence would have to be developed, according to Hanson. No reliable witnesses have come forward, he said.

But the family has not ruled out pursuing a wrongful death suit in the future, and declaring Ayla dead would be a first step in filing future lawsuits, Hanson said.

The process of determining wrongful death involves a probate court hearing in which evidence must be

presented and witnesses called, according to Skowhegan attorney John Youney. Police, for instance, would have to testify that they have tried to find Ayla but have not been successful.

“They have to present evidence that everybody has done everything they can to find the child,” Youney said. “It takes evidence that everyone involved believes the girl is dead.”

If a suit is filed, it would be heard in the court of Elizabeth Mitchell, who in November was elected probate judge for Kennebec County after her husband, Probate Judge James Mitchell, died Sept. 8.

The only possible thing to be obtained in a wrongful death suit is money, according to Youney.

“There’s no sending someone to jail,” he said. “If it’s a criminal case, they might end up in jail.”

PAINFUL MEMORIES

Ayla’s paternal grandmother, Phoebe DiPietro, lives on a quiet residential street that on Thursday was blanketed in snow. It is the house in which Ayla reportedly was last seen alive.

A green Chevrolet Blazer was parked late last week in the driveway at the one-story house. Halloween stickers depicting a witch on a broomstick flying past a moon were affixed to the front door; snowmen stickers dotted windows facing west and south.

The houses on the street are fairly close together, yet no one reported seeing anything unusual in relation to Ayla’s disappearance on that mid-December night in 2011.

[Penny Rafuse, who lives across the street](#) a few houses away, remembers the flurry of police, game wardens and news media that swarmed the neighborhood that winter as authorities searched for Ayla and gathered evidence.

On Wednesday, five years later, when a television news vehicle was parked near the DiPietro house, the memories came flooding back for Rafuse.

“It brings back horrid memories,” she said. “I have faith in the justice system and at some point, those that are responsible will pay their dues. It is just a matter of time before someone weakens and comes forward. Karma will prevail.”

Rafuse said she is baffled about how the adults in the DiPietro house when Ayla disappeared can sleep at night, “let alone keep defending each other with false information.”

“Are they protecting each other, or have they been threatened? I remember the 17th like it was yesterday. I drive by the house almost every day and always look at it with a sense of sadness.”

Like Ayla's maternal family, Rafuse believes that keeping the case in the spotlight is important.

"We all need to remember this little girl and be strong and supportive for her mom," she said.

Meanwhile, Trista Reynolds said she has reached out to Roberts, who was in the DiPietro house when Ayla reportedly disappeared, asking that she reveal what she knows.

"I know people have reached out to her," Trista said last week. "I know she reached out to a personal friend of mine. She has contacted people I know. I reached out to Courtney a month ago in a Facebook message and said, 'I'm not asking you to tell everything, but be a mom and think about how I feel.'"

Trista said Roberts runs a Zumba fitness class and Trista has friends who attend her class. She holds out hope that Roberts, who is the mother of a young child herself, will give police the information they need to resolve the case.

"In all honesty, I need somebody to have a heart, to be a parent and feel like what I'm feeling," Trista said.

Trista's biological father, [Ron Reynolds, of Portland](#), remains angry that those responsible for what happened to Ayla are keeping to themselves and not allowing her maternal family to know the truth.

On the five-year anniversary of her disappearance, the raw pain he felt when he first got the word she was missing returns. He believes the DiPietros and Roberts are culpable in Ayla's demise and often obsesses about that until his wife tries to turn his attention elsewhere.

"They still walk free, every day," he said. "It's sad, it really is, because it should not be like that. I don't need a court of law to tell me that they're guilty, because I know that they're guilty. They need to be held accountable for what they did to Ayla, what they did to this family. They won."

Ron Reynolds said when he was told Ayla was missing five years ago, he knew deep in his soul that Justin DiPietro had something to do with her disappearance.

"When I called and asked Phoebe where Ayla was, she said, 'I don't know; someone took her.' That really, really makes me sick because then I asked where Justin is and she said he barricaded himself in the bathroom and police are trying to get him out. No one came in that house and took her out. It came right down to foul play."

He said that every day he prays for the case to be solved and that those responsible for the crime go to jail for a long time.

"I have to keep the faith. And when I talk to the state police, they always tell me, 'Ron, hang in there. We're working on it every day to find Ayla and get justice for you and the family, and don't do anything

to jeopardize the case.' I have to believe that it's going to happen. It will happen, because sooner or later, someone is going to mess up."

Ron Reynolds, who served 15 years in the U.S. Marine Corps and has been doing security work about 40, said he is grateful for his wife, Frankie, who suffers from leukemia but manages to prop him up when he plummets into despair over the loss of Ayla. He and his wife support each other, he said.

"I sit in my living room. I look at Ayla's picture. When my wife's lying down, I cry. I get angry and angrier and angrier when it overpowers me. It bothers her. She doesn't want to see me in pain, but it bothers her, too."

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